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RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0130
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001543

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IRAN: UNESCO DIRECTOR SHARES THE UPS AND DOWNS OF
OPERATING IN IRAN

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Peter Eckstrom. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a visit to Ashgabat this week, the Director of UNESCO's office in Tehran spoke of the challenges of cooperating with the Iranian government in several areas, including training journalists and the preservation of cultural heritage sites. He also described the reaction of his local staff to the presidential election outcome, the government's preference for political favoritism over competence in government appointments and its poor use of public funds. Notwithstanding the challenges, he remains highly optimistic and sees UNESCO's mandate in Iran as bridging the gap -- caused by Iran's isolation -- between Iranian scientists, artists and professionals with their counterparts in other countries. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) In a December 2 conversation with Iran Watcher, Qunli Han, Director and Representative of UNESCO's Tehran "Cluster Office" (also covering the agency's work in Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan), said that despite the unique challenges of working with the government in Iran, he is pleased with the outcome of many of their projects. He sees UNESCO's main mission there as facilitating contact between Iranian academics, artists and scientists with those of other countries in the face of Iran's increased isolation in the world. Recently, he said, UNESCO has begun to focus on Iran's "intangible" cultural heritage (i.e. music, poetry and dance), in which, somewhat to his surprise, the Islamic government takes great pride, as much of it represents Iran's pre-Islamic Persian, rather than Islamic heritage.

MEDIA TRAINING? "JOURNALISTIC ETHICS" OKAY, BUT NO PRESS
FREEDOM SEMINARS

¶3. (C) Han, a Chinese national, has been in Tehran for the past two years and directs UNESCO's cultural heritage, educational, scientific, and media/information technology projects in Iran. He said that when it comes to media and information, the government is keen to promote IT training, but routinely nixes anything related to training for journalists, particularly if it is remotely related to press freedom. So far, they have approved only courses in "journalistic ethics" for the media, but Han said that he now

has the green light to conduct workshops on how to report on topics like infectious diseases and natural disasters, having observed that very often journalists in Iran are unfamiliar with either the lexicon or background of those subjects.

THE ELECTIONS AND AFTERWARDS

¶4. (C) After last June's disputed presidential election, Han said that he gathered his local staff and told them to "please be careful" and avoid the street demonstrations taking place, because, he said, he could not guarantee that the UN could "get them out of trouble" if they were detained. He said that the employees, particularly the younger ones, were adamant that they wanted to participate, notwithstanding the risks, because they saw it as their right. Just after the election, his IT specialist was severely beaten and then detained with a group of demonstrators on the street, but fortunately released by the militiaman who was supposed to be guarding him. Han said he was extremely relieved and believes the employee would not otherwise have survived his injuries. He called Iranian youth "at the end of their rope. They can no longer be held down."

¶5. (C) Han said the Iranians he knows were angry and shocked following the election: In the months that preceded it, he said, people had hopes that a great change was going to come about, particularly following an international conference on religion hosted by former president Khatami in October 2008, attended by several prominent former European prime ministers and the former UNESCO general director, Federico Mayor. He said people viewed the event as a signal that Iran was moving away from its former isolation and entering a new era. The reported visit last spring by the Swiss Ambassador to the former U.S. Embassy compound also caused speculation and hope that the U.S. was planning to reestablish a diplomatic

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presence in Iran. He opined that had the elections been conducted fairly, Ahmadinejad would likely still have prevailed, but with a very narrow margin.

POLITICAL FAVORITISM TRUMPS COMPETENCE

¶6. (C) Iran is home to ten UNESCO World Heritage sites, and, according to Han, has a high number of skilled archeologists and experts in restoration. In recent years, however, the government has been replacing skilled professionals in government ministries with less competent individuals closely tied to the regime. For example, UNESCO learned recently that the team with which they were collaborating on a project to reconstruct the ancient city of Bam, which was destroyed in an earthquake in 2003, had been dismissed and would be replaced. To date, however, a new team of experts has not been appointed, so the project is on hold.

SHAHRAK-E GHARB: EMBELLISHING EMPTY LOTS

¶7. (C) Han and his wife reside in the affluent district of Shahrak-e Gharb, in NW Tehran, an area that was home to U.S. diplomats and other expats prior to Iran's revolution. Large swaths of the district are still unused and undeveloped, however Han said the government has recently begun large-scale projects to pave and beautify those areas using Afghan refugee labor, with sidewalks and marble fixtures, to no apparent end. He sees these efforts as nonsensical, "a waste of petro dollars that the government could be using in much-needed areas like education, health care or the arts." Iranians he knows are frequently asking "where all the money went" from the recent oil boom.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Han is an engaging interlocutor who exudes optimism. Rather than focusing on what UNESCO cannot do in Iran, he directs his efforts to those things that it can. Given the Iranian people's current difficult circumstances and isolation in the world, he feels all the more responsible to bridge the gap between its scientists, artists and

educators and their counterparts in other countries. In his words, "There are problematic officials in Iran, but once you get past that layer, you find the really good people. They're everywhere."

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